

Best Practices for Hybrid Art Museum Programs for People with Dementia

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<https://doi.org/10.25889/9qqr-vm66>

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Abstract

The Reflections program at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University offers art gallery tours for adults with dementia and their care partners. Originally an in-person program, Reflections adapted to a virtual model during the COVID-19 pandemic and now utilizes a hybrid model with in-person and online programs. Surveys distributed to Reflections’ participants indicate the benefits of having both in-person and virtual options post-pandemic. Anecdotal survey data and participation statistics show high engagement and satisfaction with the current hybrid mode. Literature about hybrid art education programs for people with dementia remains limited. We offer best practices and insights for other museums and organizations interested in serving people with dementia through similar arts-based initiatives.

Keywords

Dementia, Alzheimer's, art museum, visual arts, visual

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Introduction

Art museums exist to serve the broader community. As populations change, museums and other cultural institutions must adapt to the needs of their communities through programming and education efforts. Recently, art museums are prioritizing public health and establishing programs for visitors experiencing memory loss, as well as their care partners. Memory loss is becoming increasingly prevalent; an estimated 6.5 million Americans today live with Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia (Rajan et al., 2021). As our population ages, this number is expected to nearly triple by 2050 (Rajan et al., 2021). Museum activities and programs can provide social interaction that reduces isolation and supports individual autonomy for people with dementia (PWD) (Flatt et al., 2015).

PWD already face disparities in health care. For example, the American healthcare system struggles to fully meet the needs of this population given the scarcity of geriatricians (Sluder, 2020). Additionally, certain minority populations are at higher risk of misdiagnosis and many have obstacles in obtaining care for dementia (Aranda et al., 2021). These existing inequities were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a disproportionate impact on PWD. Studies have shown that Covid-19 is more likely to be fatal for PWD (Hariyanto et al., 2021). Early in the pandemic in April 2020, about a third of PWD had "a worsening of cognitive symptoms, particularly of memory and orientation abilities," as well as increased agitation and depression (Canevelli et al., 2020). To add to these challenges, many PWD were not able to access routine health care due to appointment cancellations and clinic policy changes during the pandemic (Canevelli et al., 2020).

While Covid-19 posed significant challenges to PWD, it also presented new opportunities for art museums to connect with this group through digital avenues. For example, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts held virtual museum visits for older adults in 2021. This museum noted benefits of a virtual tour format; for example, it was easier for featured artists to participate during the tours (Lafontaine & Sawchuk, 2022). Museums in Singapore responded to the Covid-19 social distancing measures in April 2020 by implementing numerous online arts engagement programs. Some of these initiatives have increased accessibility by offering tours in many languages, enabling adults over 50 to engage with Singapore's culture and history (Tan & Tan, 2021). Recent studies suggest these virtual art tours have both emotional and social benefits; online programs at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art resulted in an increase in positive emotions, awe and life satisfaction among participants (Averbach & Monin, 2022).

Rising numbers of PWD and the disproportionate impacts of Covid-19 indicate a pressing need to provide accessible and sustainable programming for this group, even after the initial stages of the pandemic. Previous studies highlight the positive impact of art museum engagement on both PWD and their care partners (Camic et al., 2016; Flatt et al., 2015). Such research inspired the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina to offer "Reflections" tours for PWD in 2013 and continue to improve the program over time. Originally modeled after the "Meet Me at MoMA" program (Rosenberg, 2009), *Reflections* tours are conversation-based and groups remain small with a maximum of 12-14 visitors. Tours last 90 minutes and include an hour in the galleries and a 30-minute live musical performance or an art-making exercise. Led by two gallery guides, the time in the galleries consists of art observation and discussion, with a structure inspired by Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). VTS-based

approaches focus on three questions: (1) What's going on in this picture? (2) What do you see that makes you say that? (3) What more can we find? (Yenawine, 2013). In the gallery, participants observe a variety of artwork, from mixed-media pieces to textiles and paintings. The program is designed to serve PWD and their care partners, both of whom participate in art observation, discussions, and art-making activities. The music performances invite live musicians into the galleries; the art-making activities encourage both PWD and their care partners to create a small craft or artwork. One example of a music activity was guided accessible movement/dance to songs inspired by the tour's artworks. A recent art-making activity involved a weaving piece with paper, beads, and string, based on a weaving artwork shown during a tour. Undergraduate and graduate students are often involved in *Reflections* as tour guides or performers. Sometimes, students help design the tours as interns at the Nasher Museum. Through engagement with *Reflections*, students can better understand the experiences of PWD and how the arts can benefit health. The *Reflections* Program is generously supported by Doug and Stefanie Kahn in honor of their fathers, as well as the Alzheimer's Foundation of America (*Reflections*, n.d.).

Reflections offers both group and public tours for PWD. Group tours cater to a particular care community or organization in the Raleigh-Durham area, whereas public tours are open to any participants from the community. Some participants are also referred to the program through Duke University Hospital's Family Support Group. While *Reflections* participants may have a range of cognitive abilities, the program encourages all to engage with art, recognizing that this may look different for each individual. Public tour participants are usually in the earlier stages of dementia, while those visiting from nursing and other residential facilities live with more advanced disease. Throughout its program, *Reflections* also promotes art education, often highlighting contemporary art and artists from traditionally underrepresented groups. For example, recent exhibitions have featured artists of Native American heritage or included work which raises awareness about violence against African American communities. One important facet of the program is recognizing the ability of PWD to continue to learn, grow, and explore new interests – often related to current events or topics of diversity and equity – through art engagement.

Prior to Covid-19, tours took place solely in person, but like many organizations, the *Reflections* program transitioned to a virtual model during the pandemic. In March 2020, the *Reflections* team and the Nasher staff began discussing how to adapt *Reflections* to a virtual format which still allowed participants to engage with art and receive the benefits of the group interactions, including intergenerational connections with students (Manohar & Ruhle, 2021). Some students continued to serve as virtual gallery guides, gaining a better understanding of the experiences of PWD and older adults during the pandemic. Some students brought innovative and unique ideas from their other online courses to implement in *Reflections*. For example, one student applied TimeSlips techniques, such as “beautiful questions” (Basting, 2021), to virtual lessons, (as described in a subsequent section) and professional training activities for gallery guides of *Reflections*. These activities for professional development included watching the TimeSlips for Friends and Family Training Module (a method of creative engagement for PWD) and hosting a group training session over Zoom with gallery guides to practice incorporating TimeSlips techniques into sessions. Older participants also enjoyed the opportunity to connect with students and learn about their coursework and future career plans. Given that many PWD were isolated during the pandemic due to social distancing and experiencing increases in negative emotions, (Smaling et al., 2022), it was important to provide a space for real-time

intergenerational community interaction. Such programs may offer structure and purpose for adults with dementia, who may be unable to participate in roles that they previously enjoyed (Manohar, 2022).

In April 2020, the program shifted to a virtual model with weekly sessions on the Zoom online platform. Each 1-hour session highlighted three or four images of artwork from the Nasher Museum's collection. These programs also often included videos with music related to the tour theme. Examples of themes include *Recycle and Reuse*, which features Stephen L. Hayes' mixed-media piece, *Flying "W,"* resembling a horse that is restrained, and *Fierce Women*, featuring Wangechi Mutu's *MamaRay*, a large bronze sculpture that portrays the likeness of a human and manta ray (Reflections, 2021). Despite a different setting, virtual conversations mirrored the insightful discussions previously held in the galleries. Participants connected artwork themes to current events and their own life experiences. Some art pieces even led to profound reflections on living with memory loss; one participant questioned whether he was "broken" after viewing artwork which was created from recycled or nonfunctional objects (Manohar, 2022). Sessions were led by one or two gallery guides, including students, who prompted lively discussions and engagement. From April 2020 to August 2021, all *Reflections* tours were conducted entirely online.

In September 2021, as Covid-19 cases declined both in Durham, North Carolina and nationally, and vaccines became widely available, *Reflections* transitioned to a hybrid model. This model included both virtual 1-hour sessions and in-person 90-minute sessions that would share the same theme each month. Essentially, the same tour was offered both in-person and virtually on different days, but the virtual format did not include the live music performance or art-making activity. The virtual format during Covid-19 and the museum's current hybrid model has proven successful, as exhibited by participants' feedback and survey responses as well as participant attendance. With its unique and effective hybrid design, *Reflections* can be a model for other art museums or creative programs which seek to engage and reach PWD in their audience.

Reflections' transition to a virtual format allowed for sustained social engagement between PWD, their care partners, and the gallery guides. The current hybrid model brought back the in-person art viewing that many of our participants and the local community missed while maintaining the virtual component that expanded the accessibility of its program to a greater audience. In doing so, the Nasher addressed the challenges of transportation to the museum, any physical limitations, and the concern of being indoors during the pandemic. From September 2021 to August 2022, *Reflections* offered approximately two in-person and two virtual tours monthly.

Given the limited literature on hybrid art programs for PWD, we aim to evaluate how *Reflections* adapted through Covid-19 and offer best practices for other organizations implementing similar programs. Specifically, we offer an evaluation of a hybrid art museum program that serves participants both in an in-person museum setting and virtually. We encourage arts and cultural organizations to consider hybrid models to increase accessibility, especially when working with PWD.

Program Feedback

To evaluate *Reflections*, the Nasher Museum distributes surveys to participants and tracks attendance data. During the Covid-19 pandemic, *Reflections* offered 230 tours and served 1869

participants virtually. The high attendance rate and tour frequency indicate the program's popularity and value during a time of social isolation.

Participants cited some drawbacks to having only virtual tours during Covid-19, such as difficulty viewing art on screen and less personal connection. However, visitors said that while there is no substitute for in-person viewing, virtual was better than not seeing the art at all.

After Covid-19, *Reflections* offered 17 virtual talks to a total of 90 participants, and 17 in-person tours to a total of 174 participants. The high in-person participation rate indicates the eagerness for PWD and their care partners to return to in-person programs, but also suggests that there are participants who continue to rely on virtual sessions. One comment from a survey distributed during this time appreciated that gallery guides removed masks when speaking. This is important feedback when balancing measures that prevent virus spread with the ability to successfully communicate with the visitors. Other solutions, like masks with a clear section near the mouth, could address both issues.

Eighty-two percent of respondents during Covid-19 preferred a mix of virtual and in-person tours instead of having only one or the other, indicating support for the establishment of a hybrid model. This approach allows individuals to participate regardless of location or other physical barriers. The model also accommodates those who seek an in-person experience to interact with art. Tracking participant attendance and survey responses for both the virtual and in-person sessions will continue to be critical to adapt the program to participant preferences. For example, on a recent virtual tour, one participant commented that he preferred the online format since it was easier to focus on a single art piece. This indicates that no single solution exists for all PWD and their care partners. The hybrid tours offer flexibility for this population, who may experience fluctuations or changes in cognitive and physical abilities.

Best Practices

Adapting an in-person program to a virtual model comes with challenges and new opportunities. At the beginning of each session, we no longer had the opportunity for in-person socialization and introductions in the Nasher Museum lobby. To break the ice in an online setting, we began each program with a "beautiful question," inspired by TimeSlips programs (Basting, 2021). Such questions have no correct answer, and encourage all participants to share. For example, for a discussion of spring-related artwork, the beautiful question was "What do you enjoy about spring?" All participants shared their responses in the first 10 minutes of the session, before the artwork discussion. This also allowed time for participants to join a few minutes late if they were experiencing technology issues.

In-person *Reflections* programs utilize name tags for all participants and gallery guides. The virtual Zoom program came with "built-in" name tags in the form of names written prominently under each participant's video. However, sometimes this name did not represent the participant's name. At the start of each tour, we asked PWD for their preferred names and changed the Zoom names to reflect this. This also made it easier to refer to participants and allowed attendees to get to know each other.

One obvious downside to the virtual platform is an inability to see the real size of an art piece; it was difficult to appreciate details or three-dimensional aspects of the artwork on a computer screen. To address this, *Reflections* tours utilize presentations which not only have artwork images, but also have close-up images of details and include images showing multiple

angles of three-dimensional works. We also use a zoom-in feature on PowerPoint to examine these aspects of an art piece.

Another important component of the program is the art-making or music activity. To incorporate these aspects into an online program, we included YouTube or audio clips of music relevant to that week's theme. Sharing audio via Zoom was initially a challenge, but we found that using Zoom's share audio feature enabled improved audio quality. While participants missed the live music, sharing videos allowed participants to see concurrent visuals associated with the music and adjust the sound settings on their own devices as needed. To recreate the art activity, we piloted sending art kits to participants' addresses so they could create a craft that week. In the *Reflections* virtual tour in October 2020, a watercolor art kit was mailed to participants to practice painting feathers, accompanying a virtual session showing artworks of birds. We also experimented with art activities that participants could enjoy without additional supplies. One week, participants created mandalas using found objects in their homes or backyards such as shells, flowers, or food ingredients. During art-making activities, caregivers may assist PWD or create their own version of the artwork themselves.

Tour evaluations suggest that the current hybrid design improves the quality of life for PWD by reducing isolation and maintaining engagement. This model allows individuals to participate regardless of location or other physical barriers that might prevent in-person engagement. The hybrid model also accommodates those who seek an in-person experience to interact with art. In this current model, *Reflections* utilizes attendance data to determine the optimal number of virtual and in-person tours each month. Tracking participant attendance and survey responses for both the virtual and in-person sessions will remain important to tailor the program to participant needs. Successful hybrid programs also require ongoing communication with residential communities in the area and the Duke University Hospital's Family Support Program.

Conclusion

During this post-Covid-19 era, some remain cautious about engaging in social settings or leaving their home (Landry et al., 2021). *Reflections* participants, who are older in age, may also be hesitant to visit the Nasher Museum in person due to increased health risks. Therefore, a hybrid model may be more accessible to Durham, North Carolina, and the larger community, allowing us to reach a wider audience of PWD. Such hybrid programs can be supplemented with art-making activities or music performances for further engagement. For virtual sessions, art kits can be delivered to participants so they can engage creatively from home. There are also options to combine more aspects of the in-person and virtual experience. For example, gallery guides could live stream a walk through the galleries, better simulating the in-person environment for participants online.

We are optimistic that *Reflections*' current programming can serve as a model for other art museums and community organizations seeking to engage with PWD during this time. To boost visitor engagement and allow flexibility for visitors' preferences, hybrid alternatives could benefit both the visitors and the museum itself. Museums will develop a stronger connection with the community and therefore be permanent establishments in society, influencing culture, social networks, and health.

Continued research on programs for PWD is essential. Similar to Romero's suggestion of continuous attention to programs for PWD (2019), programs like *Reflections* will require

continuous modification as populations change, global events occur, and new preferences arise. Participant evaluations are critical to this field and can be expanded. Additional research areas may include how museum staff is impacted by programs for PWD and the effect of Covid-19 on other visitors, students, museum staff, and communities. Other aspects of such art programs, such as the strengthening of relationships between PWD and their care partners, have been described and merit further study (Romero, 2019). Research may also create rich opportunities for transdisciplinary partnerships, such as arts on prescription, as cultural and medical institutions seek to learn more about the benefits of arts-based experiences for PWD and how to adapt these experiences both virtually and in person.¹

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¹ Acknowledgements footnote: We thank the participants and gallery guides who make the Reflections program possible. We also thank Jacqueline Perez for providing the survey data collected in 2021. The Reflections Program at the Nasher Museum is generously supported by Doug and Stefanie Kahn in honor of their fathers, as well as the Alzheimer Foundation of America.

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